

Khilafat

The term *khilafat* has a specific translation in English as ‘caliphate’ but also a broader one as ‘succession’. These two terms embrace the specific and the general weight of the concept of *khilafat* in Islamic civilisation.

Specifically *khilafat* refers to the leadership of the Islamic community after the death of the Prophet. Simply, the Muslim community was to be headed by a pious and learned man member of the Quraysh, the Prophet’s clan, who was to defend the land of Islam, enforce the law, appoint and supervise godly officers and judges, and to collect and distribute alms. From the assassination of the fourth caliph in 661 down to March 1924, when the last Ottoman caliph was dispatched on the night train to Paris, the universal caliphate operated for the most part in defiance of the model. Thus, a powerful strand in Islamic political thought held that the true Islamic caliphate did not outlast the first four caliphs. Nevertheless, such as the power of the idea of the universal Islamic caliphate that it continued to be invoked as a source of legitimacy right down to the modern era.

The idea of *khilafat*, of succession, however, has a more general weight in Muslim civilisation. Indeed, it takes but a moment’s reflection to realise that this must be so. The correct transmission of all the knowledge revealed by God through the Prophet, and realised by the early Muslim community, was work of the foremost importance. No less so was the transmission of the work of scholars and mystics who strove in their time to make their knowledge socially useful. But, what might be obvious for the transmission of the Quran or the Traditions, or formal and spiritual knowledge, was also the case in other areas such as poetry, or painting or calligraphy. It was celebrated in that classical Islamic form, the collective biography, or *tazkirah*, in which the contributions of a particular family or group or

profession through time might be recorded, each biographical entry indicating from whom an individual may have received knowledge, to whom he (or she) may have transmitted it with anecdotes to indicate the nature of the individual, the quality of his learning and the esteem in which he was held by others. There was a strong tendency for Muslims to see themselves as the successors of those who went before them as the makers of their community, of being involved in the immensely important task of receiving precious knowledge from those who preceded them, of making it useful in their time, and of passing it on to their successors. For some in the specifically spiritual areas it could become an increasingly difficult task. Right down to the nineteenth century the weight of the task was reinforced by the fact that up to this time, it had been a world in which books were relatively scarce, in which knowledge tended to be transmitted orally, or by example, and was received in person by a pupil from a master.¹

Meanings of khilafat in South Asia

The idea of *khilafat* both in its specific political sense and its more general civilisational sense was well-reflected in India. Under the Delhi Sultanate the sultans routinely acknowledged the universal caliphate. Iltutmish was formally invested as sultan by the envoy of the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad. His coins refer to him as the 'helper of the Caliph' (Nasir-i Amir al-Muminin), a title used by many who succeeded him. The name of the last Abbasid caliph appeared on the coins of Ala al-Din Masud in the 1240s and continued to be used long after his murder in 1258 down to the end of the reign of Ala al-Din Khilji in 1316. Mahmud and Firuz Tughluq placed particular emphasis on their submission to the universal caliphate, by then with the Abbasids in Cairo.² On the basis of the evidence, in particular the numismatic evidence, as Aziz Ahmad concludes, 'one may assume that the

name, or in its absence, the authority of the Abbasid caliph, was accepted practically throughout the period of the pre-Mughal rule in India as the source and sanction of the sultan's legal authority.³

Under the Mughals any sense of deriving authority from the universal caliphate was dropped. In the fourteenth century, long before their rule, the meaning of the term *khilafat* in Persian had begun to shift, reflecting the end of the Abbasid caliphate, and came to be synonymous with terms used for state or kingdom like *dawlat* or *saltanat*.⁴ The Timurids would refer to themselves as holding a *khilafat*, a position of great power. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Mughals commonly referred to themselves as *Khalifa* and from the time of Akbar, their capital was referred to as the *dar al-khilafat*.⁵ When, at the beginning of Akbar's reign, the Mughals had an opportunity to correspond with Sulayman the Magnificent, they referred to the Ottoman sultan as one who had gained the exalted rank of *Khilafat*, although it should be noted that down to the late eighteenth century the Ottomans were careful not to call themselves *Khalifa* or to arrogate to themselves the office of *Khilafat*. They referred to the young Akbar as being installed 'on the seat of the Sultanate and the throne of the *Khilafat* of the realms of Hind and Sind. In using the term *khilafat*, both in reference to the Ottoman Sultan and to themselves, the Mughals meant no more than great ruler.⁶

Indeed, in considering the Mughals there is a succession, a source of legitimacy, which meant much more to them than the universal caliphate. It was their succession from Genghis Khan and Timur. All is most clearly set out at some length in Abul Fazl's *Akbarnama*. Abul Fazl traces Akbar's majesty back to the mythic Mongol queen, Alanqoa. A virgin, she 'became pregnant by that light [divine light] in the same way as did her Majesty (*Hazrat*) Miryam (Mary) ... The outcome was the line which was to lead to Genghis Khan,

and then to Timur, and ultimately through Babur and Humayun to Akbar. Abul Fazl several times uses the term *khilafat* meaning imperial succession.⁸ This vision of authority led to that genre of Mughal book illustration in which the Timurid succession is represented by, say, Jahangir sitting together with Akbar, Humayun, Babur and Timur.⁹

While, however, the idea of the universal caliphate was rejected by the Mughals, the more general civilisational idea of succession, of islamicate knowledge, example and charisma handed down from the past, and particularly from the early years of the community, remained strong under the Mughals and after. It was reflected in respect for the Prophet. From the time of `Abd al-Haqq Muhaddiths, who died in 1642, India was a growing centre for the study of hadith, reaching a notably high point with the Ahl-i Hadith movement of the late nineteenth century.¹⁰ Growing emphasis on respect for the Prophet was manifest in the considerable increase in biographies of the Prophet in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the popularity of *nath* (poetry in praise of the Prophet) as a verse form.¹¹ Another dimension, of course, was the respect given to Sayyids as descendants of the Prophet, thus biographies, particularly of learned and holy men, might emphasise the extent of their subjects' love and reverence for the Prophet.¹² This sense of civilisational succession was also reflected in descent from the companions of the Prophet and association with the early community at Medina. Thus, the `ulama of Farangi Mahall claimed descent, through `Abd Allah Ansari of Herat, from Ayyub Ansari, the Prophet's standard bearer and host at Medina. Members of the family, who could, lived in Medina or owned property there, while Mawlana `Abd al-Bari on his third pilgrimage in 1911-12 made an attempt to visit Ayyub Ansari's shrine at Eyup in Istanbul.

The sense of civilisational succession was present in those who handed on knowledge of all kinds. When a sufi *pir* made a disciple, for instance, he would hand the

disciple a *shijra*, which would show how the saint's spiritual way had been handed down from Muhammad to `Ali, down to founder of his order, and then down to his *pir*. Moreover, he might remind his disciple, as `Abd al-Bari of Farangi Mahall did in his biography of the saint of Bansa, that following the Prophet was the way to come near to God:

To follow the Prophet truly is this: to follow his habits, his behaviour, his manners, his instruction so that the life of the Muslim becomes like the life of the Holy Prophet This is called the true Khilafat, to lose one's identity in the being of the Prophet.¹³

So any disciple of a sufi would sense that they were the latest bearers of most precious knowledge, ways of behaving, and forms of spiritual understanding, which would enable them to become close to God.

The sense of civilisational succession was no less present amongst the `ulama. When a scholar finished teaching a book to a pupil, and the pupil read back the book to his teacher with a satisfactory explanation, the teacher would give his pupil an *ijaza*, a licence to teach the text. On that *ijaza* would be the names of all those who had transmitted the text, going back to the original author of the book. The pupil would be in no doubt that he was the bearer in his time of learning which reached back deep into the community's past (in the case of hadith to the time of the Prophet), learning hallowed by time and by those who had transmitted it. And what was true for the master-pupil relationship in religious learning was also true for other forms of knowledge from music to medicine.

The trauma of the break in khilafat

The period from the ending of the Mughal dynasty in 1858 to the end of the *Khilafat* movement in 1924 was a period of great trauma for the Muslims of Upper India. In this time, many came to face the fact that much of what had been passed down from the past was no longer relevant to the present. The satirist, Akbar Ilahabadi, captures the nature and fullness

of the change:

The minstrel, and the music, and the melody have all changed. Our very sleep has change; the tale we used to hear is no longer told. Spring comes with new adornments; the nightingales in the garden sing a different song. Nature's every effect has undergone a revolution. Another kind of rain falls from the sky; another kind of grain grows in the fields.¹⁴

The Muslims of Upper India experienced the shock of the Mutiny and the savage British response to it. There was the brutal treatment of the two pre-eminent cities of Muslim culture and power, Delhi and Lucknow: the driving out of the populations; the razing of many muhallas to create fields of fire; the punching of wide boulevards into the heart of the old cities to exercise control, the driving of the railway into them, a symbol of the new source of power. British authority was stamped on the face of Muslim India as never before.¹⁵

`Harken to me'—Altaf Husayn Hali told his mushaira audience in 1874, 'do not go into the ruins of Delhi. At every step priceless pearls lie buried beneath the dust ... times have changed as they can never change again.' There was the realisation that they must break with the succession from the past as exemplified in what C.M. Naim has termed 'one of the most horrifying scenes in any Urdu novel, when Nasuh, the hero of *The Repentance of Nasuh*, burns all the works of classical Persian and Urdu literature he finds in his son's room because they did not provide a religious and moral education, the route to success in the new world.¹⁷ There was the realisation amongst the old governing elites that, if they were to get on in the new world of British India, they must forsake madrasa learning for the English language and English education, as made available in government schools and universities and Aligarh College. There was the realisation amongst reforming 'ulama that, they would best be able to protect Islam if they abandoned the great persianate traditions of *ma`qulat* scholarship, logic, philosophy and theology, in favour of the revealed sciences, Quran, Hadith, *Fiqh*. There was the realisation amongst many 'ulama and sufis that side by side

with this they must also reject many of the ideas and practices associated with Ibn `Arabi, which might suggest that there was intercession for man with God. Those who were sensitive and reflective realised that they were in the midst of an identifiable break, a sharp break, with the past, in particular the persianate past. It was this which led `Abd al-Halim Sharar in the second decade of the twentieth century to document his memory of that past in the pages of his magazine, *Dil Gudaz*, subsequently published as a book *Lucknow: the Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*.¹⁸ The grief at the trauma was all brilliantly expressed by Haliؑ *Musaddas*, his elegy entitled `The Ebb and Flow of Islamؑ published some thirty years or so before and declared by Sayyid Ahmad Khan to be a `mirror of the nationؑ condition and an elegy expressive of its grief.¹⁹ The following passage expresses the feeling of a break with a great past:

When autumn has set in over the garden,
 Why speak of the springtime in flower?
 When shadows of adversity hang over the present,
 Why harp on the pomp and glory of the past?
 Yea, these are things to forget;
 But how can you with the dawn
 Forget the scene of the night before?
 The assembly has just dispersed;
 The smoke is still rising from the burnt candle;
 The footprints on the sands of India still say
 A graceful caravan has passed this way.²⁰

This sense of final rupture with a great past, of a final rupture with many of the central traditions of Islamic civilisation, was symbolised by the *Khilafat* movement of the years 1919 to 1924, in which, incidentally, passages from Haliؑ *Musaddas* were often recited at public meetings, driving the audience into convulsions of grief. This movement did not spring from nothing. From the 1840s Indian Muslims began to take an interest in Ottoman claims to the caliphate which had been revived with specific purpose in the treaty of Kuchuk Kainarji of 1774. Both Shah Muhammad Ishaq, grandson of Shah Wali Allah, and Sayyid

Muhammad Fadl, leader of the Mappila risings, migrated to the Ottoman empire to support its policies. Steadily, the reforming schools of `ulama came to recognise the Ottoman claim to the universal Islamic caliphate and, from the accession of `Abd al-Hamid II in 1876, Turkish agents in India, as in other Muslim lands, sedulously worked to stimulate loyalty to the caliphate.²¹ During this period Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, who had argued for political unity in the Muslim world, and the role which the caliphate might play in achieving it, visited India. His impact, however, was limited at the time, although it came to be greater subsequently through his influence over Abul Kalam Azad and Muhammad Iqbal.²²

From 1911, fervent interest in the *Khilafat* was sparked by the endgame of the Ottoman empire which, as the empire was dismembered from 1918 onwards, grew into the greatest mass movement India had yet seen. I have often wondered why this movement should have grown to such remarkable proportions, why it generated so much emotion? Certainly, it took place in the context: of economic disruption caused by World War One and its aftermath, of the hardline stupidity of the Government of India's Rowlatt Acts, of political fluidity and uncertainty created by the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms, and of an extraordinarily lively Muslim press, which followed closely every change of fortune in the Muslim world. And most certainly it fashioned opportunities for two of the great mobilising forces in the politics of the age - the `ulama and Mahatma Gandhi.²³ But to all of these elements I would like to add one more: the iconic power of the fortunes of the *Khilafat*, representing the end not just of a religio-political ideal but also of many of the real traditions and practices which had made up Muslim civilisation. Consciously, or for many subconsciously, the threat to the *Khilafat*, and its final demise, symbolised the breaks, the fractures, the loss of contact with the past which Indian Muslims were experiencing in other aspects of their lives.

The new concept of khilafat

The end of the *Khilafat*, however, does not bring to an end the salience of the word *khilafat* in twentieth-century India. At the very time that one meaning of the word was losing contemporary relevance, another was emerging - the caliphate of man. The origins of the new meaning reached back to the Quran but it gained force as a consequence of the religious changes brought about by the Islamic revival from the nineteenth century. Muslim reformers, confronted with the problem of how to sustain Islamic society on earth without power, created a willed, activist, for some a 'protestant' Islam. It was in this context that they attacked both the subjects in the madrasa curriculum which smacked of philosophy, theology and the triumphs of medieval persianate scholarship and the thought of Ibn 'Arabi, the so-called pantheistic thinker, and all idea that there might be intercession for man with God. It was in this context that reformers both began to translate large numbers of key sources - the Quran, Hadith, and the materials to make them socially useful - into Indian languages and for the first time put them into print, and began to remind Muslims of the horrors of the Day of Judgement and the need for regular self examination to meet the high standards God had set for them. They thus fashioned Muslim individuals who were powerfully conscious that they must, in order to achieve salvation, act on earth to sustain Islamic society. And so the individual Muslim conscience came to replace political power in Muslim hands as the guarantor of an Islamic order.²⁴

Arguably, the newly enhanced role of the individual Muslim conscience, and the centrality of action on earth to the good Muslim life, was expressed most completely by that sensitive and remarkable thinker, Muhammad Iqbal. For Iqbal, man was chosen by God but equally free to choose whether he would follow God's guidance or not. Man realised himself in the creative work of shaping and reshaping the world. The reality of the individual was

expressed most explicitly in action. `The final act=he declares in the closing sentences of his *Reconstruction of Religious thought in Islam* `is not an intellectual act, but a vital act which deepens the whole being of the ego and sharpens his will with the creative assurance that the world is not just something to be seen and known through concepts, but to be made and remade through continuous action.²⁵ Man was the prime mover in God's creation, as Iqbal makes so clear in Man's response to God in his poem `God's Talk with Man=

You created the night - I lit the lamp
 You created clay - I moulded the cup
 You made the wilderness, mountains and forest
 I cultivated flowerbeds, parks and gardens.²⁶

As the prime mover, Man was God's representative on earth, his vice-regent, the *Khalifat Allah*. Thus, Iqbal draws the Quranic reference to Adam as his vice-regent, or successor, on earth, which had been much discussed by medieval commentators on the Quran, and not least among them, Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn `Arabi, into the modern politico-Islamic discourse of South Asia.²⁷ In doing so he replaces the ideal of the universal caliphate with the fact of the caliphate of Man.

This new meaning attributed to the idea of *khilafat* was taken up by Mawlana Mawdudi, founder of the Jama`at-i Islami, who added his considerable weight to its presence in Islamic thought both on the subcontinent and beyond. It was powerfully present in the grand narrative of Arab reform from Muhammad `Abduh and Rashid Rida through to Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb. It was no less present amongst the most influential thinkers of the Islamic revolution in Iran, for instance, `Ali Shari`ati and Ayatollah Murtaza Motahhari.²⁸

We are only just beginning to come to grips with the significance of Man as the successor of God in modern Muslim societies. It has, most certainly, contributed to the huge energy demonstrate by Muslim peoples over the past century. It has also played its part in stimulating individualism and in empowering the self. There is a growing body of

anthropological and sociological research which suggests connections between the emphasis on personal responsibility in Islamic reform/Islamism and the fashioning of socially responsible citizens - the bedrock of civil society perhaps, the foundation of democratic values perhaps. It is too early to say, but I suspect that the shift in the meaning of *khilafat*, from universal caliphate to the caliphate of man, which took place most visibly in India in the first half of the twentieth century may be one of the more momentous changes in Islamic history.

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¹ 'Islam and the impact of Print in South Asia', in Francis Robinson, *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia* (New Delhi, 2000), pp. 66-104.

² Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment* (Oxford, 1964), pp. 1-11.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵ T.W. Arnold, *The Caliphate* (London, 1924), p. 159.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 159-62.

⁷ H. Beveridge, trans., *The Akbar Nama of Abu'l-Fazl* (Delhi, 1989), p. 179.

⁸ For instance, *ibid.*, pp. 46, 204. But he also uses 'Caliph' as 'Caliph of the Age', meaning great ruler of the age.

⁹ Amina Okada, *Indian Miniatures of the Mughal Court* trans. Daka Dusinberre (New York, 1992), p. 58.

¹⁰ Ahmad, *Islamic Culture*, p. 190.

¹¹ Robinson, *Islam and Muslims History*, p. 95-96.

¹² Francis Robinson, *the 'Ulama of Farangi Mahall and Islamic Culture in South Asia* (New Delhi, 2001), pp. 82-86.

¹³ 'Abd al-Bari, *Malfuz-i Razzaqi* (Cawnpur, 1926), p.4.

¹⁴ Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam, 'The Satirical Verse of Akbar Ilahabadi (186-1921)', *Modern Asian Studies*, 8, 1, 1974, p. 9.

¹⁵ 'The Muslims of Upper India and the Shock of the Mutiny', Francis Robinson, *Islam and Muslim History*, pp. 138-55.

¹⁶ from a *marsiya* entitled 'The Devastation of Delhi' recited by Hali at a mushaira in Lahore in 1874, Narayani Gupta, *Delhi Between Two Empires 1803-1931: Society, Government and Urban Growth* (Delhi, 1981), pp. xviii-xix.

¹⁷ C.M. Naim, *Urdu Texts and Contexts: The Selected Essays of C.M. Naim* (Delhi, 2004), p. 146.

¹⁸ Abdul Halim Sharar, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, E.S. Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain, ed. and trans. (London, 1974).

¹⁹ Christopher Shackle and Javed Majeed, trans. and ed., *Hali's Musaddas: The Flow and Ebb of Islam* (Delhi, 1997), Introduction, p. 53.

²⁰ Translation by Syed Abdul Latif quoted in Gail Minault, 'Urdu Political Poetry in the Khilafat Movement', *Modern Asian Studies*, 8, 4, 1974, p. 462.

²¹ Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan 1857-1964* (London, 1967), pp. 123-31.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 186.

²³ For the Khilafat Movement see Gail Minault, *The Khilafat Movement: Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India* (New York, 1982).

²⁴ 'Religious Change and the Self in Muslim south Asian Since 1800', Robinson, *Islam and Muslim History*, pp. 103-21.

²⁵ M. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious thought in Islam*, (Lahore, 1954), p. 154.

²⁶ Translation of part of Iqbal's poem 'God's Talk with Man' in N.P. ankiyev, 'the Doctrine of Personality', H. Malid ed., *Iqbal: Poet-Philosopher of Pakistan* (New York, 1971), p. 274.

²⁷ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, p. 95. The particular verse is 2.30. 'And when they Lord said to the Angels, I am going to play a ruler [khalifa] in the earth, they said: Wilt thou place in it such as make mischief in it and shed blood? And we celebrate Thy praise and extol Thy holiness. He said: Surely I know what you know not.' Maulana Muhammad Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, 5th ed. (Lahore, 1973). Jaafar Sheikh Idris provides an excellent discussion of the views of early commentators on the meaning of this and other verses using the term *khalifa*. He notes that the interpretation favoured by thinkers of the Islamic revival is closer to that of Ibn 'Arabi than that of Ibn Taymiyya, but it nevertheless remains distinct. He explains the modern understanding of the caliphate of man in terms of the idea 'that man is master of this world and of his own destiny, and of material development, which material development is not desirable only because it satisfies human needs, but also, and perhaps more importantly, because it is a reflection of man's great abilities' as the outcome of Western influences. J.S. Idris, 'Is Man the Viceregent of God?', *Journal of Islamic Studies*, I (1990), pp. 99-110.

²⁸ Francis Robinson, 'Other-Worldly and this-Worldly Islam and the Islamic Revival', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 14, (1) 2004, forthcoming.